# *The Art of Collecting*

A LECTURE BY

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I hope this will interest & amuse — as from one Collector to another. RW.

*Sir Robert Witt was recently asked to give a private Lecture to a company of Art-lovers on the Art of Collecting. A member of his audience, Sir Robert Bland Bird, Bart., himself a member of the National Art-Collections Fund, has suggested to myself, as Honorary Secretary, that in the belief that the subject would be of interest to many members of the Fund, he would like to defray the expense of printing and circulating the lecture to the members.*

*His kindly offer was accepted and a print of the lecture is enclosed.*

ALEC MARTIN

*The National Art-Collections Fund*
*Hertford House*
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# *The Art of Collecting*

I HAVE been asked to address you on the art of collecting, though it is far more than an art, it is also a science and even a sport.

I can only suggest a few thoughts, to beguile your leisured consideration, and touch lightly upon the subject, for it has many aspects.

Those who collect nothing generally plead the want of time and money. Time and money are the two greatest impostors in the world. An active business man, whom I knew, with vast responsibilities, and at the same time a passionate art-collector, was asked how he managed to combine two such divergent interests. This was his reply: 'Each year of our lives contains fifty-two Sundays and three hundred and sixty-five nights'. A great answer, though he might well have said, 'weekends' instead of 'Sundays'. For if you will only add up the numbers of hours that these Sundays and nights provide, you can no longer plead 'No time'. Of the other, the money impostor, I will speak later.

So let even the busiest of us remember how much of our lives we spend in what the poet described as:

'Dipping buckets into empty wells,
And growing old with drawing nothing up.'

And let us set about making some kind of a collection, however late in life.

First let me remind you that it is happier to be a collector, than to be the owner of a collection. It is the chase, not the quarry, that counts, the pursuit of the unattainable, the discovery of the unexpected, with all its vicissitudes of success and failure.

This pursuit must be based, partly on taste, partly on knowledge. Neither will suffice alone.

Taste, in the true sense of 'fine artistic judgment', is something natural, and bestowed upon us at birth, by the Gods above. I mean, of course, good taste, for you will all have met the pathetic figure who has 'a great deal of taste' —and all of it bad. It is doubly blessed to be given eyes to see and fingers to touch.

But the collector must also have knowledge, which comes from study, training and experience.

How can we acquire these? From ownership itself, from observation and from criticism.

As regards ownership, we all possess something in our homes, either inherited or acquired. What we have inherited cannot, unfortunately, represent our own taste. Until we become collectors, what we have acquired consists too often mainly of the gifts of our friends—those terrible wedding presents, for instance, that disfigure our

walls, and corrupt our taste. Even marriage is dear at such a price. So take down in your homes something of what you have merely inherited, and that has ceased to appeal, and take down most of your wedding presents. Having done this dispose of them but not to your friends.

I do not mean, of course, in either case that sentimental and family considerations can be ignored. They deserve their full value, the heart rightly outweighing the head, as so often.

Then observation, and the power to notice, are again of central importance. Who of us on entering a friend's house on a visit looks round first with interest and curiosity, to see what furnishes the room or hangs on the walls. Many a room could be hung with masterpieces by van Eyck, Rembrandt and Watteau, without a single visitor being aware of the fact. Look then well about you. *Circumspice*.

Finally, criticism—the critical faculty, the passion for comparison—plays a vital part in providing the knowledge, the experience that the collector must possess. It is untrue that 'critics are those who have failed in literature and art'. Let every man be his own art-critic. Even the very young may touch the core of the matter, and can glimpse the truth of what art should mean.

A boy taken to a gallery was asked why he liked the pictures there? His answer, 'Because pictures make things look like I haven't seen them look before'. Ungrammatical indeed, but the very foundation of art criticism.

And his sister, visiting an exhibition of Nudes, by

Matisse, told of her pleasure thus: 'Until now I never thought people looked so nice without their clothes'. There speaks the true spirit of the Renaissance.

Ever since the world began there have been collectors—beginning, perhaps, with the magpie. The list is too long to give you. Of famous men you will recall the Medicis, Charles I, Robert and Horace Walpole, Napoleon, and Goering.

Then what to collect? What has been collected?

In primitive times heads and scalps. Solomon—in spite of being called the Wise—seems to have collected wives. Today, the most familiar collection, alas, is that of the tax collector.

But there are many other subjects—stamps, autographs, first editions. Or pictures, sculpture, porcelain, furniture, embroideries, manuscripts? This audience may well prefer to consider works of art.

That being so, we have to deal with the matter from the point of view of both public and private collections, collecting for the museum, and for the home.

Collecting for the museum and the gallery is incomparably the more difficult. My many years' experience of it at the National Gallery, at the Tate, at the National Art-Collections Fund, have taught me this at least, that when choosing for galleries and museums, through the inevitable boards of Trustees and committees, such bodies very frequently agree only on what they dislike. To one member what he is asked to consider is a masterpiece, to another, a horror. Too often, the result is a compromise, or a majority

decision, in favour perhaps of a mediocrity.

If a Dictatorship is permissible anywhere in the world, it might well be sometimes, though not always, in a gallery or a museum. As a corollary to this overdue reform, should not the director be reasonably removable, rather than appointed for life? For like every one of us, he may outstay his welcome, even his success.

And these same Trustees and committees, men of taste and knowledge and public spirit, have their real problems. As a Chinese sage has pronounced, 'masterpieces beget masterpieces'. Shall Trustees and committees then only acquire masterpieces? But what then becomes of the proper representation of all schools, and periods and subjects, of all tastes and likings? My selection of masterpieces will assuredly not be yours, nor yours mine. And to secure adequate representation, gaps in public collections need first to be noted, and then filled. For many years, even the National Gallery possessed no picture by Albert Durer—and then it was too late to secure the finest of his work.

But for the private collector, who will seek what he wants to live with, chamber music, as it were, rather than orchestral, the task is easier by far. He has only himself to please, he will be his own master. Even his mistakes will be his own. For he is responsible to no committee, to no newspaper, and to no public.

What then should be the outlook of the private collector? It should be a double one, aesthetic and scholarly.

Aesthetic above all, for he must first choose what he himself likes, what he feels he will most enjoy.

A recent critic has put the matter in a nutshell. 'The man who only knows what he likes has always been the obvious butt of the connoisseur. Yet he has the root of the matter in him, and he is the ultimate arbiter of fame. The collector, when considering an object, should say, "either that is a masterpiece or I am an idiot".'

So he must choose the thing itself, not the label on the frame, not the name in the catalogue, not even what his friends tell him he should like. It needs courage, but he must begin that way. Then having done so, as a rule he will find that he was an idiot, and, having bought it, that he has bought badly. Only so will he learn, and he must refuse to admit defeat. We learn by falling.

But he must know what he likes, and must have learned to know it for himself, and it is just at this point that the scholarship and experience, the knowledge and study to which I have referred, will come to help him. He will broaden his outlook and correct his errors, and the future lies before him.

And after the aesthetic reaction on first looking at a work of art of 'How does it appeal?' the scholar will follow it by two further questions, 'Where and when?' Where and when was this created? If, for instance, the answers are 'In Italy, in the sixteenth century' he will have placed it in its proper setting, both in space and time. He can then judge it as it should be judged.

He, too, will have his temptations, the temptation, on the scholarly side, to pursue mere rarity, without recognizing that, with all its fascination, it is but a will-o'-the-wisp.

And now at the very outset, the art-collector will be faced with the apparent conflict and opposition between ancient and modern, between new and old, between old and young, between the living and the dead.

Some would indeed place what is now called an 'iron curtain' between old and modern art. A late President of a famous institution might well preside on one side of the curtain, mounted on a horse, probably a hunter, from which he would address the world in terms of vivid disapproval of the modern outlook. He would overstress the tendency to distortions and aberrations, instead of regarding them as experiments, with their inevitable possibilities of failure and success, of trial and error.

On the other side of the curtain, would be found a number of charming young people, though some of them, it is true, looking as if they had been young a very long time. They will have no one to speak for them, for they will speak for themselves, and all at once. They will call themselves by different names—Vorticists, Super-surrealists, Pre-Cubistic-post-Impressionists—and other terms with which I will not trouble you, for they are hard to pronounce, difficult to spell, and remind one so painfully of some of the B.B.C. Third Programmes.

So the collector will be faced with the problem of whether he can, or should, fall in love with both old and modern art. Falling in love is a ticklish subject—sometimes beyond our control. 'You cannot be in love with two at the same time', cries the Philistine. 'Oh, yes, indeed I can', replies the Humanist.

Thus approached from the amatory aspect, the problem vanishes, and no real conflict persists.

But art has another aspect, one almost akin to religion—and no war of religions has ever surpassed in blood and tears, in force and fury, the warfare between old and modern art. Men have died gladly for each of these causes.

Who among us has not taken at least a minor part in these battles? Two mothers were gazing at a modern drawing—by Rodin, as it happened. 'My little girl could draw better than that', said one, 'So could mine', replied the other, 'And I would spank her if she did not'. Even Cézanne thought fit to tell Gauguin 'Honestly your painting is mad'.

It would not be seemly, on an occasion like this, to tell you how deeply an old master may antagonize a young mistress and vice versa. So here, today, I will try to preach reconciliation, not forgetting that the part of the peacemaker is always an ungrateful one.

To the older generation I would say 'Everything old was once new'. To those far-off days of the grim, hierarchic, Byzantine Madonna, the outburst of Giotto's inventive variety must have seemed almost indecent, a red revolution, that shocked as well as disgusted. So, too, the arrival of Giorgione and Titian, to those nurtured on the Primitives of the fourteenth century. But to shock is at least to challenge, and shock tactics have their place, even in modern warfare. So be a little patient with modern excesses. There is no need to anathematize. If they deserve

oblivion, as too many assuredly do, irreparable time will inflict it on them, gently but surely.

Then to the young I would—greatly daring—say, in the words of Norman Douglas, 'Not *everything* that is old is putrid'.

I have already reminded you of the escapist's plea of want of money for not being a collector, and of the impostor that is 'the power of the purse'. In very truth, there is none so poor—even in these austere days—that he cannot go a-hunting. Even a few shillings will make a beginning. For art is no longer only, even mainly, for the rich. What then is needful to join the happy band of collectors? Only to be willing to give up, in material life, something that is not essential, in order to secure something else that is materially useless, but answers to some call, satisfies some spiritual hunger in each of us. We have only to exchange what is comfortable for what is lovely, and we have joined the great company of the 'Grands Initiés'. Nor shall we ever look back.

Your demands as collectors must naturally be as limited as your means, and as the accommodation you can provide in your house or flat. But there are little masters as well as great ones, there is pleasure to be found in both, and you will be following a fine tradition.

On these modest lines that I have suggested, the financial aspect, and the fear that you may be imperilling your future and your family, will take its proper place.

On a larger scale, the problem of wise investment necessarily plays its part. Happy indeed is the man who can

say, 'I buy what I like, and care not the least if, on my death, it be worth far less than what I paid for it'.

For those who are less fortunate, it is but prudent to bear in mind that, subject to the vagaries of fashion, the old is mostly established and documented, the reputations well known and accepted, while the supply of old masters is being constantly diminished by those that are absorbed daily by galleries and museums the world over.

In the case of modern art, on the other hand, it must be remembered that the supply is daily increasing, and that reputations have still to be tested by the passing of years, while here fashion plays an even more unpredictable part. Of the many thousands of modern artists, it is inevitable that the number of those whose fame will survive the winnowing of time must, arithmetically as well as artistically, necessarily be small. The risks of capital depreciation are, accordingly and unfortunately, greater than in the case of old masters. The prizes may indeed be higher, but there are fewer of them. Those who have chosen Cézanne and Renoir have made a brilliant choice, and in consequence a brilliant investment. It is like laying down a cellar. One can but use one's judgment, and hope for the best. Courage, therefore, is needed as well as skill. Also prudence, to control the limits of the investment risks we run, in paying, as we must all pay, for our pleasures. But wisely directed, these pleasures are beyond price, and beyond value.

And even where the desired object is beyond your purse, bear in mind that nostalgic first line of one of Shakespeare's

sonnets and console yourself with his:

'Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing.'

Yet another factor in collecting, is the imperative need of change. If, as has been well said, 'The art of reading is to skip judiciously', the art of collecting is to weed drastically. Always be prepared to revise, to discard, for taste grows as well as experience. You do not like the same things when you are forty as when you were twenty, at least if you have continued to grow. Expand, restrict, modify what you will, but do not petrify.

There are many forms of discard. One of the most charming perhaps, that of exchange, with friends and colleagues.

And whenever possible, sleep on a proposed purchase and take it home and look at it there, before deciding. It may well save a blunder, or at least avoid a regret.

One warning to the collector may not be out of place. It is against undue optimism. The trail of the optimist has disfigured many a fine collection. Pride is legitimate, the satisfaction with the discovery is well deserved. But the collector of geese, who calls them swans, becomes but a figure of fun to his friends.

I have referred, in passing, to fashion and its vagaries; fashion the poet has called 'Folly's child'. For here no principles avail, all is incalculable. The history of art, our best barometer, reveals the amazing ups and downs of popular favour or disfavour. When we recall that Guido Reni and Guercino were once the Gods of Olympus, and that the Primitives were neglected; when Fra Angelico's

lovely *Coronation of the Virgin* was hung in the cloak-room at the Louvre, who shall pronounce any reputation to be 'set fair'? Botticelli had once ceased to count. Vermeer, though famous in his own lifetime, had passed completely out of public ken, to occupy the dim obscurity of the cellar.

To the male collector at least (I dare not say it to the female), one can only give this advice, 'Though you may not be able to lead the fashion, at least do not follow it, or you will buy at the top, and perhaps come to sell at the bottom'. Choose what nobody wants at the moment. Even Victorian art may be staging a come-back, though we may hope without its redundant draperies and pious fig-leaves.

Then again, do not only collect and own, but collect and show. In the past, some collectors have failed lamentably in this respect. They have been accumulators, misers, hoarding and keeping their treasures to themselves—a kind of inverse exhibitionism. The name of one famous collector family leaps to mind. So be both owner and loaner. Lend freely, welcoming criticism, even when chastening.

How enjoyable are the public exhibitions of private collections such as those we have lately seen at the Tate Gallery, where a few collectors, 'those happy few'—who have backed their fancy in modern painting, have challenged the approval, or disapproval, of a wider public. And it is the more to their credit that they have issued their challenge to the world, in the art of their own country. The day seems to be approaching, at long last, when British

art, still almost unknown and quite unappreciated abroad, will come into its own. The smaller, more intimate exhibitions of private collections arranged by the Arts Council also provide a new feature of welcome significance.

And show as generously in your own homes, to your friends. In the case of every work of art two artists should be involved, the artist to create and the artist to display. In a modern home, with its small walls and low ceilings, it is not possible to show much at a time. Nor is it desirable. So cultivate the virtue of restraint. 'No more than three or four pictures by eminent artists should ever be hung in one room. After these have been enjoyed for four or five days others should be substituted.' So wrote a very early authority—one Li Chih, a Chinese, of the eleventh century—even if it be, alas, a counsel of perfection.

And a modern French critic has sounded a beautiful note with his 'Space round a picture is like silence round music'.

Remember, too, do not hang too high, it is a common fault. And re-arrange and re-hang continually, in new company, in a new light, against a new background. A collection re-hung is almost a new collection. It will richly repay. Thus will those who visit you, find something they have never seen, or at least never noticed before. The surprise of the unexpected has true psychological value.

Finally, may I add a few words on the forming of a collection, which has been of special interest to myself? I mean that of drawings, particularly of old master drawings.

Such a collection has been described as in itself at once the most civilized and least spectacular form of collecting. And

was it not Ingres himself who wrote *Le dessin est la probité de l'art*?

Drawings have appealed to me because of my modest means and modest accommodation. For others, more spaciously circumstanced, pictures, as opposed to drawings, may well make a greater appeal. But a small house or flat can accommodate only a few pictures. They are static, too, and not easily changed.

On the other hand, drawings are small in size, and therefore easy to transport, to house and to show. A single room will comfortably contain hundreds of drawings, kept in convenient solander cases, but easily turned over in them for enjoyment. While, when mounted on the same sized mounts and fitting into the same sized frames, and these provided with movable backs, they can be displayed round the walls, and changed in half an hour, from week to week, and again and again, for friends to see.

The cost for the beginner may be anything from a few shillings to a few pounds, though of course not for the great names or for outstanding examples. But in this field and on this scale it remains not only possible, but easy, to secure a work of art as original and authenticated from the hand of a master, as a picture by him which would cost hundreds or thousands.

At the same time drawings are incomparably rich in their variety of subject, approach and technique, covering almost all aspects of everyday life. Landscapes and seascapes, portraits, domestic genre, family life, sport, historic events, caricatures, animals, flowers—all these, and many others,

find their place, and make their appeal. So, too, we may find among them the artist's hasty note or record, his first idea for a picture, his preliminary sketch, his careful study, his finished work of art for its own sake.

Again, among the mediums he uses, watercolour, black and coloured chalk, pencil, pen and pastel, are all to be found.

Moreover, the interest in drawings is rapidly growing.

The works of the great Masters are for the most part recorded and numbered. Discoveries among them are therefore rare, and becoming rarer.

But fortunately while the Museums continually engulf the work of the most famous artists, so interest necessarily extends far beyond them, and must continue to extend to those less known.

Just as Homer sometimes nods and as the great Master may throw off careless or inferior work, so the less famous may, and often do, achieve minor masterpieces. Seek and find them.

Here the field is wide and open and the opportunities for research and discovery for every private collector increase from year to year without limit.

My own interest in drawings arose from just these very simple and practical considerations. I found it delightful to explore what was for me a new field, and fascinating to learn, even at the inevitable cost of blunders and mistakes. The ardours of the chase, whether in the form of success or failure, made an irresistible appeal, which even the passage of years has not dimmed.

And here I must bring these random remarks and suggestions to a close. I have, at least, not kept you long. And I can only hope that it is not the case with you, as it was in the delightful story of the man who, having lectured nonstop for two hours, summed up with the words, 'And now, gentlemen, as I have covered all the ground the subject is exhausted'. Whereupon his audience replied, in chorus, 'And so are we'.

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